

# CONSERVATION *Showcase*



## Will Buffer Benefits Disappear?

Dave York is worried. He's afraid high land and corn prices and the expiration of Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) contracts will prompt farmers to take out many of the 1,300 miles of grass and tree buffers he's helped install along the streams and rivers in Carroll County. Those grass and riparian buffers not only look pretty, but they provide pheasant habitat, keep soil in place and filter out pollutants from rainwater runoff entering Carroll County waterways.

York is the district conservationist for Carroll County. As a USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) employee he is part of a conservation partnership that includes elected district commissioners, federal, state and district employees and volunteers that are all involved with helping landowners improve their land and the environment. York's team works with local farmers and landowners on conservation strategies and practices that are tailored to meet resource concerns. In Carroll County, that can range from assisting producers with manure management storage and application issues to using terraces and buffers to slow and clean storm water runoff before it enters lakes and streams.

Carroll County has some of the most productive farmland in the nation. Half of the county is flat due because of glacial move-



*Iowa Pheasants Forever members Jim Riesberg, Chip Wittrock, Joel Wittrock, Tracy Buck, David Gretteaman, John Danner and Dave York hold a sign destined to mark a buffer strip. More than 1,300 miles of buffers in Carroll County prevent stream bank collapse and soil erosion while filtering storm water runoff. The buffers also provide excellent habitat for pheasants and other wildlife. Buffers in Carroll County Iowa provide pheasant habitat and cleaner water for those downstream. (NRCS Photo by Kristy York)*

ment and the other half is rolling with wind-blown loess soils. Loess soils are highly productive for growing crops, but they easily erode, especially from hillsides. Loose soil becomes a pollutant when it enters lakes and streams. If chemicals, like phosphorus and nitrates are attached to it, the soil laden runoff can cause major problems downstream. Those problems can include filling lakes with sediment and causing water treatment facilities the extra expense of removing nitrates and other chemicals.

Eleven years ago when he arrived in Carroll County, York recognized the problem and joined with others to attack erosion and improve water quality. The Carroll County Pheasants Forever (PF) chapter became a

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*Chip Wittrock*



*Jim Riesberg*

key player in the erosion fight. Grass and tree buffer strips along county waterways became an important tool in their battle.

“Early on,” said York, “our team decided to make our buffers a minimum width of 66 feet. CRP rules said they needed to be 30 feet wide for water quality, but we wanted our buffers to count for habitat, too.”

PF member and farmer Jim Riesberg says the Carroll County PF chapter has been very active in promoting buffers as a way to increase pheasant habitat. “Over the years,” said Riesberg, “our chapter has provided native grass seed cost share to producers, we’ve hired a person to go door-to-door to promote buffers, our members have provided free labor and equipment to drill the native seeds, and we conducted a labor intensive letter campaign aimed at producers. In that letter, we gave each producer a map of their property showing where buffers should go and we outlined the financial benefit of installing buffers on their property. Years later, farmers are still bringing that letter into our NRCS office and asking about buffers.”

Chip Wittrock, Carroll County PF president, says the numbers of pheasants have gone up with the number of buffer miles installed. Wittrock, who has 12-acres of buffers on his 40 acres of land, says it is not unusual to wake up now and see 60 to 70 pheasants on his property.

A key component of the buffers program has been CRP administered by USDA’s Farm Services Agency (FSA). CRP is a voluntary program available to agricultural producers to help them safeguard environmentally sensitive land. Producers enrolled in CRP plant cover crops that are designed to improve water quality, control soil erosion, and enhance wildlife habitat. In return, FSA provides participants with rental payments and cost-share assistance. Contract duration is between 10 and 15 years.



*District Conservationist Dave York stands with a stuffed pheasant in his Carroll County Natural Resources Conservation Service office. Carroll County Iowa has installed 1,300 miles of buffers to protect water supplies and provide bird and animal habitat. Pheasant numbers have gone up with the number of buffers. All of that may be in jeopardy as changing economics may cause some farmers to put buffer lands back into crop production.*

In Carroll County, the current CRP base rental rate is \$145 per enrolled acre. Incentives can push that incentive rate to \$225.

“We have 100 CRP contracts representing 1,057 acres up for renewal in 2008,” said York. “That represents about of 15 percent of the buffers we have in Carroll County. Over the next four years 60 percent of the land in CRP contracts will come up for renewal. We are hoping for a very high renewal rate.”

Without a high CRP renewal rate York, Riesberg, Wittrock and Carroll County conservationists are concerned many of the buffer benefits will be lost. “We’ve seen water quality improve and pheasant numbers jump with buffers,” said Riesberg. “We are hoping farmers renew their CRP contracts in spite of the high land and corn prices. In Carroll County we need the benefits of the buffers.”

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